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THE INADEQUACIES AND NEEDS OF BRITISH STATISTICS

In November, 1919, a petition was submitted to His Majesty's Government setting forth the inadequacies of official statistics for the United Kingdom and the British Empire, and suggesting the appointment of a commission to make an inquiry for the purpose of effecting a reorganization of the existing statistical system. The defects which the petition sets forth briefly and clearly, are of such interest that the petition is presented in full in the following paragraphs. The names of the petitioners are those of a long list of distinguished individuals, and also representatives of various learned bodies and societies, of county and municipal authorities, of medical offices and public health committees, of chambers of commerce, and of various companies and firms.

"1. The undersigned Petitioners desire respectfully to represent to His Majesty's Government the urgent need of a reorganisation of the present system of official statistics as the foundation of a proper system of civil intelligence, in the first place for the United Kingdom, and in the second place for the British Empire.

"2. It is generally recognised by statesmen, publicists, writers and students, that official statistics, as at present collected and published, are inadequate in arrangement and scope for the purposes they should serve, in spite of the efforts and ability of individual official statisticians.

"3. Amongst the causes which have been suggested in different quarters are the following: (i) Absence of any general supervision of national statistics as a whole. (ii) Lack of co-operation between the different departments, except so far as this may be arranged on a voluntary basis. (iii) The fact that compulsory powers are too few and too seldom applied. (iv) Defective supervision of the collection of statistics in some cases, and the employment, especially for census purposes, of persons ill-paid and insufficiently educated and therefore uninterested in the collection. (v) Antiquated and anomalous legislation, such as that which prescribes different financial years for various annual returns. (vi) Inadequate financial provision for the collection of essential statistics.

"4. The attention of the Royal Statistical Society has been called from time to time by some of its officers and members to the imperfection of official statistics. In 1871, Mr. Purdy, one of the Secretaries of the Society, recommended the institution of a central statistical office. In 1907, Sir Charles Dilke, in his Presidential address to the Society, pointed out that there had been little general improvement since 1880 and advocated a permanent statistical control. Similar conclusions were reached in a paper read before the Society in 1916 by one of the Vice-Presidents, Mr. Geoffrey Drage. In June, 1919, the Council of the Society appointed a Committee on Official Statistics consisting of Mr. Geoffrey Drage (Chairman), the Rt. Hon. Herbert Samuel (President of the Society), Dr. A. L. Bowley, Dr. J. C. Stamp, C.B.E., and Mr. A. W. Waterlow King, to press for a Parliamentary inquiry into the whole subject, with general power to act. The result is the present petition, for which, however, the signatories are alone responsible.

"5. The following examples of defects in statistics have been adduced: (i) There is no general information as to wages since the incomplete census of 1906. This census, the census of production in 1907, and the census of population in 1901 and 1911 are not collated, so that there is no definite means of knowing at any date how many wage-earners there are, what they produce, how much they earn and how many people are dependent on them. (ii) There is no information as to the number or income of persons who neither earn wages nor are assessed to income tax, because its collection does not fall within the scope of any existing department, and in consequence

the aggregate of national income can only be roughly estimated. (iii) The statistics of home production are very incomplete. In the only census of production of which the report is published, that of 1907, the amounts paid in wages were not obtained. (iv) The railway traffic statistics are so jejune that they are useless either as an index of the trade of the country or for the purpose of international comparison. (v) The trade between England and Ireland is imperfectly known. (vi) There is no official statement of the number of trained seamen in the British mercantile marine. (vii) The number and class of houses available cannot be accurately ascertained from any official publication, nor is there any record of the number of houses built year by year. (viii) Information with regard to consumption of food, clothing and other necessities is almost entirely wanting. Such illustrations could easily be multiplied. It is almost universally the case that persons engaged in any serious investigation have to rely on roughly approximate estimates in relation to one or more essential factors.

"6. With regard to the Empire similar difficulties occur, though, owing to constant agitation in recent years, some reforms have been secured. It was pointed out to the Dominions Royal Commission of 1912 that there was still a pressing need of (i) a common statistical year, (ii) a common statistical method, including a common method of classification, *e. g.* of metals and textiles, estimation of value and record of the origin and destination of goods, (iii) an annual report of the trade of the Empire on a scale sufficiently large to give adequate details of the trade of the overseas dominions, (iv) some reliable criterion of trade and production and some means of establishing satisfactory comparisons between the productive powers of the several states of the Empire.

"7. Now that the war is over and that there are in the air so many projects of reform both social and commercial, it has become more than ever necessary to provide a system of civil intelligence based on sound statistics which will help to show not only the cost of proposed social reforms, but also the results of changes in our commercial system. It is not too much to say that there is hardly any reform, financial, social or commercial, for which adequate information can be provided with our present machinery, and the same is true with regard to changes that have been proposed in our commercial relations with the overseas dominions and foreign countries.

"8. YOUR PETITIONERS SUBMIT *that the questions raised in this memorial are of sufficient importance to justify an immediate inquiry by a Royal Commission or Parliamentary Committee, and they suggest that such Commission or Committee should forthwith be appointed to inquire into the existing methods of the collection and presentation of public statistics and to report on the means of improvement.*"

PROGRAM FOR NEXT ANNUAL MEETING

A committee, whose names are published in this issue, has been appointed by the President to arrange a program for the next annual meeting. Members of the Association are urged to send to the Secretary's office or to any member of this committee suggestions for papers and discussions. The committee will appreciate the coöperation of members in various fields of statistical work in making the annual meeting interesting to all.